

Needs Assessment for Youth Services Center at Barren County High School

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Abstract

The needs of high school students are ever changing. It is essential for school personnel to be informed about the needs of the students they currently serve. The primary purpose of this exploratory study was to identify the needs of freshmen students in a rural high school setting. This study involved assessment of secondary data that was originally collected by school personnel in January 2006. The instrument that was utilized during the original data collection was a 32 question survey about the degree to which a variety of factors affected the subject's lives. The survey was originally distributed to the entire freshmen class, however, this study analyzed only 25 randomly selected surveys. Study findings revealed that the freshmen students of both genders desire to learn about their options after graduation, and that many of these students are not aware of how to access the Youth Services Center at their high school. These findings and others inform the Youth Services Center personnel about potential service gaps and areas for intervention and preventative measures. Future studies should assess the faculty's knowledge of student stressors and the symptoms that students may exhibit.

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Introduction

Often the behaviors that adolescent's exhibit are indicators of deeper issues (Riley, 1984). It is imperative for educators and other school personnel to look beyond the immediate behavior and allow the student to share the deeper issue. Similarly, it is important for school support personnel to acknowledge the student's need to be engaged in the classroom as well as to support the student's mental and emotional well being. There is often a clash between the work that school support personnel are conducting with students outside of the classroom, and what school faculty are attempting to conduct in the classroom. Even when students are physically in the classroom, their minds are often elsewhere. It is the mission of the Youth Services Center at Barren County High School to meet the needs of students and their families to ultimately allow students to be physically and mentally present during the school day.

The purpose of this study was to identify the factors and circumstances that keep students out of school or inhibit their personal and academic well-being. Faculty and administrators at Barren County High School would like to see their students complete high school and advance to college or stable employment. Research suggests that there are three main factors that inhibit college aspirations for rural youth; they are "financial resources and needs, educational opportunities, and the socio-cultural context of community life" (Boyle, 1966). Although this study was conducted in 1966, much of what it suggests may still be the case today.

One factor that can be a barrier to student success is substance use and abuse. A recent study showed that there were approximately 44 percent of teens in high schools in the state of Kentucky who smoke (Kentucky Youth Tobacco Survey, 2004). A similar study found that 27,500 kids try cigarettes for the first time each year, and 12,500 of them become new, regular

daily smokers (as cited in Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids, 2005). Students who are addicted to nicotine have a difficult time focusing in the classroom. On a tobacco free campus such as Barren County High School, students who are caught with tobacco are sent away from school for one day of alternative suspension.

Another factor that keeps students mentally or physically absent during the school day is stress and anxiety caused by relationship issues. During adolescence, individuals typically experiment with a wide range of behaviors and life style changes as part of the natural process of developing a self-identity and independence. There is a natural shift in perspective, as adolescents begin altering their worldview. As theorists (Inhelder and Piaget, 1962) have observed, the thinking of the preadolescent is rigid, literal and grounded in the “here and now”. Adolescent thought, however, becomes more abstract and hypothetical, Inhelder and Piaget (1962) observed. During this time, high school students will often allow their friends and significant others to play a more influential role in their lives than their parents. Any messages that may have been shared with them about healthy relationships may be questioned at this time.

Self-image is another factor that plays a significant role in student’s lives. Studies have shown that sports and non-sports activities can enhance a student’s self-image (Melander, 1997). Additionally, extracurricular activities afford students excellent opportunities to develop both socially and emotionally (Bienvenu, 2005). As part of the “Millennial” generation, current high school students are characterized as “wanting to be involved”, “pressured”, and “achieving” (Raines, 2002). However, in a rural community, access to extra-curricular activities to match every interest can be somewhat limited.

Method

The research design utilized in this exploratory study was a cross-sectional survey design, using a 32-item quantitative survey instrument. The purpose of this study was to identify the factors and circumstances that keep students out of school or inhibit their personal and academic well-being. The survey instrument consisted of questions about the subject's perceived level of assistance with basic needs and additional resources, the subject's experiences with substance use, and level of interest in a number of extra-curricular activities. Answers were reported on a interval five point likert scale. Possible responses ranged from "not at all" (1) to "very much" (5).

Brenda Chaney, MSW, LCSW, and the Coordinator of the Youth Services Center at Barren County High School distributed the survey instrument in January 2006. Ms. Chaney distributed the survey during homeroom classes to all freshman students. As to not taint the results, she simply introduced herself and distributed the surveys. She asked students to turn the surveys over when they had completed them, and after all students had completed the survey instrument she collected the surveys one by one. The surveys were then taken to the Youth Services Center and stored in a filing cabinet. A random sample of Ms. Chaney's data was utilized as secondary data for this researcher. This researcher ensured that each survey had an equal chance of being selected for analysis by thoroughly shuffling the instruments, compiling them into a stack, and selecting every tenth survey.

After surveys were selected, this researcher entered the data into an SPSS file (version 10.0). None of the completed surveys contained excessive missing data, which for this study was more than two items, therefore, all 20 surveys were included in the data set and none were discarded. Cronbach's alpha statistics were run on the Youth Service Center Student Survey in

order to assess the instrument's internal reliability. The mean, median, mode, and standard deviation of the responses were also calculated and reported, in order to portray their dispersion and central tendency. These factors were also calculated according to gender. Pearson's r correlation tests were computed with the intent to identify possible relationships between specific factors listed on the survey instrument and this researcher interpreted the results.

Results

Of the surveys selected ($n = 25$) forty-eight percent of the respondents identified as male ($n=12$), and forty-eight percent identified as female ($n=12$), and one person did not identify as either gender, and left the question blank. Eight percent of respondents ($n=2$) reported that much or very much assistance was needed to meet the following basic needs: food supplies, clothing, dental services, eye care services and food supplies. Four percent of respondents ($n=1$) reported that much or very much assistance was needed with the following services: medical, nutrition, and teen pregnancy, anger management. Twenty four percent ($n=6$) of respondents reported that much or very much assistance was needed to address their self-esteem and twelve percent ($n=3$) reported that much or very much assistance was needed to address their body image. Sixteen percent of respondents ($n=4$) reported that they need assistance with stress management, and twenty four percent of the respondents ($n=6$) identified a need for much or very much assistance with finding a part time job.

There were no respondents who reported that they felt much or very much pressure to take drugs. Similarly, no respondents reported that they were much or very much likely to experiment with alcohol, marijuana or prescription drugs. However, twelve percent ($n=12$) reported that they were much or very much likely to use tobacco products. No respondents reported that they have considered dropping out of high school, and twenty eight percent ($n=7$)

reported that they would like to learn about options after graduation. Eight percent of respondents ($n=2$) reported that they would like to receive tutoring.

Twenty four percent of respondents in the sample ($n=6$) reported that they know how to access the Youth Services Center much or very much. Eight percent of respondents ($n=2$) indicated that they were much or very much interested in participating in the following activities: CPR/First Aid training, summer camps, support groups and safe babysitting classes. When asked if they were interested in participating in after school clubs, almost twenty-one percent of respondents ($n=5$) reported that they were much or very much interested. Four percent of respondents ($n=1$) identified much or very much interest in parent/student activities. Twenty four percent of respondents ($n=6$) reported that they were much or very much interested in participating in peer counseling. Twenty percent ($n=5$) reported that they were much or very much interested in participating in volunteer projects, and thirty two percent ($n=8$) reported the same level of interest in self-defense courses. There were no students in this sample who reported that they were much or very much interested in participating in the Junior Guard.

Two significant relationships were identified between key variables in the study. The first was a strong positive correlation found at the .01 level between those respondents that want to receive tutoring, and those that have considered dropping out of school ($r=.739, p<.01$). Second, there was a moderate positive correlation found at the .01 level between those respondents in the sample who reportedly know how to access the Youth Services Center and those who reported an interest in participating in support groups ($r=.417, p=.05$). Utilizing Cronbach's Alpha, it was determined by this researcher that the Youth Services Center Student Survey is reliable at the .821 level.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to identify the factors and circumstances that affect students and may keep them out of school or inhibit their personal and academic well-being. This study was purely exploratory, and did not involve a hypothesis to be tested. Pearson's r tests revealed two significant relationships amongst key variables. First, the positive relationship between those who want to receive tutoring and those who have considered dropping out of school was intriguing. This finding is important to the personnel in the Youth Services Center, because this center organizes the Extended School Services (tutoring) during the school year. This finding shows the importance of advertising Extended School Services to students and also checking in with students who are involved in this tutoring program, as many of them may be considering dropping out of high school. The second significant relationship identified by Pearson's r test was a moderate positive correlation between those who are interested in support groups and those who know how to access the Youth Services Center. Again, this finding is important for Youth Services Center personnel, as this center organizes and facilitates student support groups. This finding shows that students who are attending support groups are likely aware of other services that the Youth Service Center provides.

Interestingly, a significant relationship was not found between self-esteem of respondents and pressure to take drugs. This indicated respondents who rated identified self-esteem as an area of their life to be addressed did not feel pressure to take drugs and vice versa. This finding offered the possibility that self-esteem may not play a role in peer pressure, or that respondents that reported self-esteem as an area to be addressed are not cognizant of pressure to take drugs or have not been exposed to drugs.

These study findings can inform further explanatory research with larger samples of high school students. Additionally, this study could be replicated each year for the remainder of this freshman class' high school career to identify potential patterns of behavior based on exposure, maturity, increased responsibility, and additional factors.

One limitation of this study was that Brenda Chaney, the Youth Services Coordinator at Barren County High School, gathered the data in one school day. On the day the data was gathered, a number of students were likely absent. Of the students that were absent, many of them were likely at the alternative school as a result of inappropriate conduct, some may have been in court, and others may have been out of a variety of other reasons. Essentially, this study only involved students who were fortunate to have been in school on the day that the data was gathered.

Another limitation of this study is that the likert scale on the survey instrument that was utilized labeled only numbers 1, 3 and 5 but did not label numbers 2 and 4. This may have impacted the responses that were provided.

Conclusion

This study contributes to knowledge base that school personnel have about the population of students they serve. Findings from this study can be utilized to tailor prevention and intervention practices that currently take place in the school setting. Additionally, this study will serve to enlighten faculty in the school setting to the unique and complex issues that are impacting their students outside of the school setting. Ultimately, this study makes an important contribution to the knowledge base of the Youth Services Center personnel by identifying factors that students self-identified as impacting their lives. It is a snapshot of what current high school

students are experiencing, and provides a first step towards understanding this group of students more clearly.

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Students Knowledge of How to Access the Youth Services Center

